

The Golden Hordes on the Isle of Calypso: If the Myth Fails

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"Reliable sources close to the Ministry of Tourism say that during a Cabinet meeting held earlier this month, at which the Parliamentary Secretary for Tourism was present, it was decided that a call for international tenders is to be issued for specialist contractors interested in Malta's most ambitious engineering project. This project involves the moving of the Ġgantija megalithic temples from their original site in Xaghra to it-Tokk, in Victoria. Contemporaneously, an international competition is also being held for the best design for the restructuring of it-Tokk, including the demolition of some buildings surrounding this square".

This report comes from an imaginary edition of an equally imaginary newspaper. However, as I was reading this extract during the seminar "Tourism in Gozo" I noticed the different reactions on the faces of the audience. Some smiled taking it for a stupid and false report, others expressed consternation at the presumed scoop. The significance of this element of disbelief will become obvious as I proceed with this paper.

Popular tradition has identified Gozo as the mythological isle of Calypso - thus making Ulysses the best known reluctant tourist on the island. This popular imagination fits very well with the idea that Gozo is an excellent destination where cultural tourism can develop. Culture - together with ecology - is an obvious, and perhaps the only, tourist asset of Gozo. Thus without much ado, let me start with a brief sketch of what, in my view, constitutes cultural tourism.

Tourism has always been characterised by a search for what can be called "the other". Pilgrimages, which are one of the first forms of cultural tourism, were always marked by an explicit search for what sociologists of religion refer to as the "totally other", among whose attributes Rudolf Otto mentions *fascinans et tremendum*. This "other" is supposed to be authentic, distinct from the commonplace, and removed as far as possible from everyday experience. This is achieved through "symbols", both material and non-material. The tourist adventure is symbolically akin to an escathological Passover, an experience of what Kenelm Burridge calls "new heaven and new earth". It is no coincidence that David Lodge has entitled one of his novels, which essentially deals with a tourist experience in Hawaii, *Paradise News* (Lodge, 1991). Thus, in my view, the object of cultural tourism includes not only those elements of culture - consisting of both material and non-material symbols - which are the product of human activity, but also human activity itself. All this necessarily bears the mark of space and time. Most of us must have seen many tourists appreciating Gozo lace, an appreciation shown by taking the lace on their hand, feeling it, analysing it and comparing it with lace produced in their own or other countries. Similarly, we have also seen tourists gazing, taking photographs and video-taping old Gozitan women sitting on low stools at their doorstep holding a pillow on their knees manipulating the small lace-producing bobbins. Garry Hogg (1967) depicts this aspect of cultural tourism in one stroke: "Among its [Gozo's] many attractions are *the pillow-lace makers*" [Italics mine]. While the former experience can be exported (for examples in international craft exhibitions), the latter cannot.

In their search for these experiences, tourists crowd at historical sites, monuments, museums, festivals and celebrations, both secular and religious. Their touch of the foot of St. Peter's statue in the Vatican Basilica and their pose for a photograph against the walls of the Ġgantija temples are an expression of their wish to identify themselves with these material symbols. Their participation - quite often as close onlookers - in the Gozitan village *festa*, expresses their desire is to be at one with the non-material symbol.

Tourists want also to have a feel of how people in other countries

live and die. The best expression of this can perhaps be found in agro-tourism. Agro-tourists are genuine anthropiles.

The importance attached to the symbolic experiences can be detected primarily from the behaviour patterns exhibited by tourists. It is, however, epitomised in souvenirs and postcards, which acquire the value of a relic rather than simply a memento.

This is as far as the tourist gaze is concerned (Urry, 1990). However, if we consider what I will call "the locals' gaze", the presence of tourists in these symbolic environments threatens to destroy the latter's attraction. Symbols should not only be seen but read, and very often the tourist can only see but not read. Being foreigners, they are counted among the uninitiated. Consequently, quite often, tourists only get a restricted, or even thwarted, meaning of the symbol or the symbolic expression. It is here that the ambivalent character of cultural tourism lies. What for the locals is a celebration, for the tourists often becomes a show. The size of tourist audience sometimes outnumbers the congregation. After a period of time this will change the meaning of the ritual for the congregation itself. What MacCannell refers to as "staged authenticity" will often be the result.

In modern tourism one can also identify another important change: the tour has become a guided-tour. This entails the introduction of an element of brokerage and an important culture-broker, namely the tourist guide. This brokerage tends to commoditise culture, and the financial beneficiaries of this process are not the locals but the brokers. Guiding tourists has in fact become a licensed gainful occupation. If one analyses the financial contribution of tourists to local *festas*, one finds that it is practically non-existent and from my research in San Pawl il-Bahar and Dingli, I can say that locals do not expect it.

Another aspect of the ambivalence of cultural tourism can be detected in the fact that it can be at the same time both functional and dysfunctional. It is functional because it makes locals aware of their historical and anthropological heritage. It also provides an income which, at least partially, contributes in financial terms for the con-



".. They work with almost unbelievable speed, their deft fingers flicerking like lizards' tails over their pillow so that their multiform bobbins tinkle like miniature castanets". Hogg, (1967) p. 199.

servation of all forms of symbolic culture.

It is dysfunctional because the presence of the golden hordes is harmful to the monuments. Tourists set in motion social and economic forces which bring about what the Italians would call *omologazione*, - which, for lack of a better term I will call "levelling" of the local culture. In the process, specific cultural traits are either lost or positively destroyed.

What about the Island of Calypso? For centuries, Gozo was isolated and less populated than Malta. In terms of cultural tourism, this was, and is, a blessing in disguise. I am not one of those who say that Gozo is interesting because it is quaint. I think it charming because it is neither superior nor inferior but different. The mythological name of Calypso metaphorically represents "the other" which the modern tourist seeks most. What tourist literature calls the four-S's of tourism - sun, sand, sea and sex are found in abundance in many other tourist destinations which range from the Bahamas, to the mile-long beach in Queensland, Australia, from Tunisia to the Riviera Romagnola, in Italy.

What is peculiar to Gozo is the warmth and industriousness of its people, its rhythm of life, its silent yet living spaces, its countryside sparsely dotted with people earning their living, the total absence of heavy industry, the festive celebrations, its history carved in megalithic temples, the delightful village churches and narrow winding streets of Rabat and other villages. The sensation which all this produces in the tourist is an experience which a foreign friend of mine who has lived in various metropolis around the globe, expressed while we were having dinner at Xaghra square: "This is heaven!"

The odyssey of the contemporary tourist is directed towards destinations as mythical as the isle of Calypso. In my view, the economic destiny of Gozo stands and falls with its myth. The Director of the London Office of the National Organisation of Tourism was recently reported as having stated that NTOM's "marketing programme is to show that our islands offer not just sun and beaches" in my view these beaches should not be promoted because they are too small and already overcrowded - "but also an infinite variety and richness for the discerning traveller interested in history and antiquity, the arts and religion." (*The Times*, 26 January 1994).

This programme is however being threatened in a twofold manner. One threat comes from the fact that the tourist is being given the economic role of a customer. And as the saying goes the customer is always right! It is both socially and sociologically possible to redefine the role of tourist. If we don't want to become a nation of workers relegated to do the menial jobs, we should define our role as host and that of the tourists as guests. This would strengthen our cultural identity which in turn would make us culturally more "attractive" to tourists. The "levelling" of culture to a least common factor can in this manner be averted.

Another threat is being posed by some of the proposed hotel development in Gozo. The hotel which has hosted the seminar "Tourism in Gozo" can, in my view, pride itself as the most successful five-star hotel in both Malta and Gozo. No one can argue that this is because "Ta' Ċenċ" is an international name in the tourist industry such as Hilton International, the Sheraton or the Hyatt and so on. Its strength rests on its distinctive characteristics, namely, its size,

its architecture and its location, rather than on its connection with an international hotel chain. The *genius loci* has been carefully respected by its structure. I am referring to Hotel Ta' Ċenċ for two reasons. First, I think that it should be considered as an icon representing the manner in which tourism in Gozo should continue to develop: small in size and strong in identity. Both qualities are essential. Secondly, the name of "Ta' Ċenċ" has recently been associated with a proposed growth, in a literal and metaphorical sense, which would have harmed both the original enterprise, the ecology of the site and the tourist industry in Gozo.

Any further increase in the number of hotel accommodation in Gozo risks the danger of more crowding by tourists and Maltese residents. This will have an adverse effect on the island's way of life. Large number of tourists in an island the size of Gozo is definitely dysfunctional. It has been proved that small is beautiful. The Structure Plan's guidelines for the safeguard of the coastline and valleys should be scrupulously adhered to. Any huge project in any sector of the Gozitan economy should be examined under a microscope. Otherwise future generations will look back in anger on the perpetrators of the destruction of the Calypsonian myth and repeat with the Romans "*Quod non fecerunt barbari, fecit*" and I will leave it to future generations to name him or them!"

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